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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence, the ability to use a language effectively in unrehearsed transactions with native speakers, must be the ultimate goal of language teaching. Drills and repetition of patterned phrases do not, in and of themselves, lead to real language use. We should begin giving students opportunities to use language in unrehearsed, unstructured situations much earlier than we currently do. The focus should be from communicative competence to linguistic competence, not vice versa. A research project revealed that a group of beginning French students who had been given systematic opportunities for creative use of French in a variety of unrehearsed settings far outperformed the control group in tests designed to evaluate communicative competence. A cultural context can be simulated to give authenticity to language learning and bring about emotional involvement on the part of the students. Games are as yet a relatively unexploited means for generating spontaneous language transactions. "Mais vous etes ma femme!" is an example which meets all criteria for a good language game. The primary concern of the language teacher must be authenticity in the classroom. Grammatical exercises and drills are most effective following, not preceding, the opportunity for free use of language. (CFM)

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OTHER PEOPLES' LANGUAGES: A GAME EVERYONE CAN PLAY*

by

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The title I've chosen for my talk has some rather diverse but not unrelated implications for language teaching today. First it suggests that we are teachers not merely of foreign languages but of other peoples' languages, with all the rich cultural context that this implies. Not just old-world culture, the heritage of the "Melting Pot", but the now culture of all the unmelted hyphenated Americans. Secondly, it suggests that languages are for everyone--not just the college-bound, the requirement-fulfillers, the high achievers. Everyone can find rewards in a second-language experience that relates to his interests and concerns. The third implication may be misleading. In its reference to languages as a game, my title suggests just the opposite of what you will see is my primary concern: authenticity. It is my hope here this afternoon to resolve this apparent contradiction and, in so doing, to share with you some of my own recent insights into how we can all contribute to making language learning more meaningful for our students.

There is an increasing realization in the profession that drills and repetition of patterned phrases do not, in and of

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themselves, lead to real language use. In fact, they may not even be a stepping stone on the path to what I and others have termed communicative competence, the ability to use the language effectively in unrehearsed transactions with native speakers. Jokes along the convention trail of late have underscored the need for more emotional involvement, more meaningful activities in our programs. "We have all that practice Monday through Friday, then Saturday comes around---and where's the football game?"[1] Or the "sick" version of the same idea,"'Mother, when do we get to France?' 'Shut-up and keep swimming.'"[2]

Through my own experience as a teacher of French, I have come to believe that we should begin much earlier than we do giving students the opportunity to use the language they are learning in unrehearsed, unstructure situations. It has always been rewarding for me to teach intermediate- and advanced-level conversation courses where students are encouraged toward self-expression in their new languages. There is a feeling of excitement, a sensation of being at the threshold of their French studies. They're almost there. Students tell of a first dream in French, of talking to themselves in French, of making up French translations to popular songs on their way to class. It is a feeling they seem to share, and yet, I have reflected many of these students differ quite noticeably in their linguistic preparation. In terms of their knowledge of French grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, they are at different points in their language study. Some come directly from a four-semester

basic language sequence. For others, there are several years between them and their last verb conjugation or dialog recitation. So, I have asked myself, if it does not seem to be a question of how long, or how well they have studied French, could it be a question, simply, of how they have studied French? And if this is true, could a sense of being "almost there" be evoked much earlier in foreign language learning? And would it then serve to sustain and direct our students through the otherwise tedious hours of memorization and repetition?

As some of you know, I had the opportunity to pose this question in the form of a research project conducted at the University of Illinois (Urbana) in 1969-1970. I have given a rather complete account of the project in previous writings, so let me pause here only to give the briefest summary of its findings.[3] One group of students in a beginning audio-lingual French program was provided systematic opportunities for creative use of French in a variety of unrehearsed settings. These included role playing, group discussion, and other communicative contexts. For these exchanges, the students were told to use whatever French they knew plus gestures and anything else that would help them get their meaning across. They were told, further, that they would not be interrupted or corrected during these exchanges but that they could always stop to ask for any French word or expression they needed.

At the conclusion of 18 weeks of study, tests were administered to assess the achievement of these students compared with that

of students enrolled in the same audio-lingual program but who had not participated in the experimental sessions. Students not in the experimental communicative skills program had spent an equivalent amount of time--50 minutes a week--in the language laboratory reviewing basic dialogs and linguistic structures. On specially developed tests of communicative competence which included face-to-face exchanges with native speakers, the group who had participated in the experimental sessions far outperformed students who had not had the benefit of such experience. There were, however, no significant differences between the groups on standardized tests of language proficiency (i.e. linguistic competence).

These data offer important empirical support for the intuitive perceptions of an increasing number of language teachers. First, performance on our currently available standardized tests is not an adequate measure of a student's ability to function in a real life situation. Second, time taken away from patterned responses and spent instead on spontaneous transactions where there are no parameters, no corrections, no repetitions and admittedly lots of false starts, mispronunciations, incomplete utterances and just plain grammar mistakes, is time well spent.

I had the opportunity to test this approach from the inside out, so to speak, during a recent visit to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Prior to my arrival in that tropical paradise I knew virtually no word of Spanish and had little knowledge of local customs. It didn't take me long, however, to learn that the coffee was

delicious, there were many kinds of lush fruits to sample, and the rum was bountiful. My first words were piña colada. I heard it because I asked the bartender at a garden party, in English, what he recommended. I tried to remember the expression my second time back, but had to ask again so as to check on both my memory and my pronunciation. The third time back I had it right off. By this time, as you might imagine, the bartender and I were well acquainted, so I asked him for a bit more information to firm up and check my understanding. Piña, he confirmed my guess, meant pineapple, and colada meant strained. The drink was a refreshing blend of rum, orange juice and pineapple juice.

Well, so much for that lovely Spanish expression. The point is I asked for it, repeated it, forgot it, asked again, practiced it, understood it and remembered it, all in an authentic cultural context. The following day I would have occasion to recall it, add to it, and put it together with new words and expressions in my further transactions with native speakers.

This is all very well, you're thinking. But what about us teachers of foreign languages? Our classrooms are not tropical gardens, and we're not serving rum drinks. So what's there to get interested in? And how do you provide for the "authenticity" more and more people are saying is so important?

Let me say first that if you agree that "authenticity" is important, and if you're serious about wanting to be yourself and letting your students relate honestly and openly to you,

then you're going to have to face squarely the matter of "errors"--both yours and theirs. With all the talk about providing for "real language" activities, all the concern for "autonomous interaction", for "daring linguistic innovation", we have yet to confront openly the matter of errors. Errors, either our own or our students, embarrass, shame or disgust us. We do all we can to avoid or eliminate them. While acknowledging the importance of spontaneous exchange in the foreign language we nonetheless continue to rely on structured dialogs, patterned drills and grammar analyses as the mainstay of our courses, suggesting that students be given ten minutes at the end of each class hour for conversation, or that spontaneous expression follow a careful sequence of drills, including that anomaly, the "communication practice drill." The assumption remains that spontaneous expression, or communicative competence, if you will, comes after the acquisition of linguistic competence.

Rather than "from linguistic competence to communicative competence" should not our focus be "from communicative competence to linguistic competence--if that's where you want to go?" There are many, probably most, of our students and potential students for whom some degree of communicative competence is quite enough. Their vocational goals may require a working knowledge of a second language in a particular field. Or they may find rewards in the expansion of self that comes of concluding transactions in a language with which they have but rudimentary acquaintance. The point is, linguistic analysis will be of

concern to only a few. It is not the basis on which to build communicative competence. A student of mine said it best, a young black American who likened the study of French grammar to the study of English grammar, "It doesn't help you to speak any better than you already do."

Fine. But what, then, do we do about errors? Do we correct them, collect them, or forget them? Quite simply, we expect them. When our students are attempting to use their new language in novel and unrehearsed ways, we treat them with the same courtesy we afford any non-native speaker. We respond to what is said, not how it is said. If you can do this, you're on your way to "authenticity", and your students will be grateful to you.

I must add a word here about teacher errors. Unless you're a native or near-native speaker of the language you're teaching, you make them. Your accent may be less than perfect, your vocabulary is limited in many domains, and there are surely a few syntactical idiosyncracies that keep coming back to haunt you. In sum, as my eight-year-old son would say, you don't know all of French, or Spanish or German. And the sooner you admit it to yourself and to your students, the better off you will all be in terms of moving toward the kinds of meaningful exchanges everyone would like to see happen. There's no need to be perfect, to know it all. You, too, can look up words or fill in with English when the going gets rough. What counts is that you're trying. As Martin Shepard has put it in his

recent book, A Psychiatrist's Head, "...a 'therapist', a teacher, a guru (they are all one and the same, really) teaches best by the example of his own struggle for authenticity."[4]

What now of the interest we spoke of? How do you get students to react, to respond? We have touched on the need for emotional involvement. Faced with the problem of how to get children to talk, testers in bilingual programs have experimented with a variety of strategies for evoking a response, from bringing a live rabbit into the room to standing on their heads and even insulting a child. There are easier ways, but, of course, not all things work with all children at all times.

Simulation of the cultural context does have its place, I feel. Facsimile transactions can be used to the degree the teacher is able to draw on his or her own as well as community resources along with available realia. Native speakers in the community and exchange students, in the school itself or at a nearby college, offer an as yet not fully realized possibility for authenticating exchanges. I myself have enjoyed playing a crabby concierge or a solicitous waitress as students pretended to get their mail from home or order steak and French fries in a Paris café. I have found this technique particularly useful in revealing cultural contrasts which might otherwise go unmentioned--as, for example, when a student orders a glass of milk to go with his steak. These enactments also help to relieve the student of the feeling that if he flew to a country

whose language he is learning he couldn't talk his way out of the airport.

Play-acting on frankly nonsensical themes, if it is of the commedia dell'arte sort, not memorized dialog, is another technique for encouraging interaction that will hold students' attention for awhile. Students can pretend they are crocodiles[5], Superman, or a used-car salesman and say whatever comes into their heads. Some will obviously enjoy this type of activity more, and longer, than others. It does have the advantage of freeing the students from themselves. I have found this important, on occasion, in my advanced oral courses where students have privately confessed their reluctance to speak about what they term "heavy" subjects--international politics, legalized abortion and the like. In such discussions they feel their intelligence is on the line, that they are being judged for their ideas. Spontaneous expression consequently suffers.

But the novelty of pretending to buy a bus ticket in Berlin or to order a steak in Paris will wear off. And the cultural context will remain, at best, simulated. What then?

The classroom may not be a theater stage, a sidewalk café or a Berlin bus station. But it is a classroom. That's real. And it follows, therefore, that all transactions, whether between teacher and student or student and student, having to do with the instructional process itself will be authentic. Discussion of assignments, class activities, order, schedules

and so forth constitute the most natural opportunity available for authentic transactions. It should be used fully from the first weeks of class. It makes little sense to have students repeat and repeat, "Bonjour, Paul. Comment vas-tu?", a phrase they're unlikely to need in any real context, only to tell them at the end of the hour, "Study page 5 for tomorrow and come to class prepared to do exercises A and B."

Beginning with the instructional register and with honesty on both sides of the desk about being non-native speakers with differing degrees of competency, the path is cleared for subsequent discussion of topics of interest to both students and teacher. These transactions have an unlimited textural potential given the unique nature of the participants, both individually and as a group. Indeed, it is this uniqueness which, if explored, offers the best assurance of maintaining the teacher's authenticity in his or her transactions.

I want to emphasize the importance of variety in helping you, the teacher, sustain your interest and, hence, your authenticity in the classroom. Anything you can do to get to know your students as individuals, with lives and concerns that extend far beyond the four walls of the language classroom, will make class activities from day to day and from year to year just that much more meaningful.

This brings me to the source of meaningful classroom language activities suggested in the title of my talk: games. Games offer a relatively unexploited potential for generating

a variety of spontaneous interpersonal transactions. Games are, of course, not new to the foreign language classroom. But the kinds of games most widely used are as a whole very limited in scope, and their place in the curriculum is usually only peripheral--something for a rainy Friday afternoon. I am suggesting, rather, games that exploit to the fullest a learner's communicative skills and, in so doing, constitute the very core of the FL program. I am not talking now about crossword puzzles, spelling bees or "Scrabble". While certainly fun and even instructive, these activities constitute playing with words and surface structures and as such are only a more palatable form of such things as vocabulary drills and grammar reviews. The most rewarding game, in terms of the goals of the foreign language program discussed above, is one that has the following attributes:

1) It provides the fullest amount of emotional involvement possible. Each player has something clearly at stake.
2) It offers a format that is simple enough to be understood by all players yet supple enough to allow for adaptations as needed to suit the needs of the players in terms of their age, number, degree of communicative competence, and so forth.
3) Success in playing the game depends not on any arbitrary criteria of linguistic accuracy (i.e. spelling, pronunciation, verb placement, etc.) but on the ability to use the language to discuss, to explore, to deceive,

> to explain, to reveal, to conceal, to cajole, to describe, to enact....in sum, to engage in the whole range of interpersonal transactions in which we are involved daily in our native language. Herein lies the authenticity of the exchanges.

Games offer an important additional advantage where they involve the teacher, not as director or referee, but as a player. Like the games played to "break the ice" at a social gathering, they help the teacher relate to his or her students, not as students but as other players. This makes it easier for us to subsequently relinquish the authoritarian role to which we are accustomed and to respond not to "how" but to "what" is being said.

Let me give you, briefly, an example of a game I've used with my students which meets the above criteria. In its French version this game is called "Mais vous êtes ma femme!" (Why, you're my wife!).[6] It owes its inspiration to that delightfully absurd scene in Ionesco's play, La Cantatrice Chauve, where a man and a woman, both visitors in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Smith, conclude after a careful exchange of data that they are, in fact, husband and wife.

Each player is given a card showing his own identity (age, nationality, profession, etc.) and the identity of the member of his family for whom he is looking. Players are free to move about the room and ask questions of anyone they choose in the search for their missing relatives. (They must in turn, of course, answer any questions put to them as well.) When

the answers a player receives correspond to the identity of the person for whom he is looking, he exclaims, "Mais vous êtes ma femme!", or father, sister, etc., as the case may be. These two players then team up to look for a third member of the family, and so on. The first family to be reunited wins the game.

There is a lot of noise and moving about as players become alternately frustrated and encouraged in their searches. But it all happens in the foreign language and without the slightest prodding from the teacher. You can either relax and watch all the activity or take a card and join the melee. Once all the families have been reunited the cards are collected and reshuffled for another round later on.

This game generates emotional involvement from the beginning. Each player has a clear-cut task and soon realizes that the more he talks the faster he will advance. The rules are quickly understood by all, and they may be adapted to fit the circumstances. Any number from, say, eight to thirty may play. The descriptions of the family members can remain within the vocabulary familiar to the student, or they may include new items. In the latter case, the teacher may want to serve as a reference person. The descriptions might reflect the special interests of the local community (farming, mining, industrial, etc.) or those of a community where the foreign language is spoken. Most important, players are free to interact away from the teacher's ears. The form their exchanges take will

vary greatly according to the communicative competence of the players. Completion of the task, however, depends not on the absolute linguistic accuracy of the exchanges but on their outcome. If a query or a response is incomplete, inaudible or incomprehensible, it is another player, not the teacher, who will express his dissatisfaction. And this is how it should be....because this is the way life is.

Well, this is just a start. If the idea appeals to you, I encourage you to begin making your own collection of games. You and your students may find popular television games such as "Dating Game", "Jeopardy" and the old-timers "What's My Line" and "To Tell the Truth" useful models in elaborating games of your own. Don't be discouraged by initial failures, however. Good games are not easy to come by. They take imagination and a real understanding of the communicative skills they are designed to develop. When you do come up with a good one, it's worth passing around.

Concerned from the outset with authentic language use in the classroom, I have suggested a number of ways in which the teacher can encourage spontaneous expression from the very first weeks of class. These begin with the use of the instructional register itself and go on to include role playing, games and group discussions. If a second language experience is to be meaningful to the vast majority of our students, these activities should replace many of the hours now spent on drills and dialogs. Grammar explanations and drills are most

effective, moreover, following, not preceding, the opportunity for free use of the language. They should not, however, become the final goal of the game. If we are serious in our intent to make communicative competence the aim of our programs, then we must not only begin there, we must end there. Final evaluation of student performance should reflect a level of competence in authentic language use, not grades for grammar tests or dialog recitations. For this, the teacher must be ready to accept errors as natural in the authentic speech of all second-language learners, expecting that as communicative competence increases, linguistic competence will follow. With this understanding we will be on our way toward making other peoples' languages truly a game everyone can play.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William D. Schaefer, quoting Jermaine Arendt, in his address, "Foreign Languages and the International Interest," at the ACTFL/SCOLT Joint Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, 25 November 1972. Published under the same title in Foreign Language Annals, Vol. 6, no. 4 (May, 1973), pp. 460-464. (Page 463 for my quotation.)

[2]Frank Grittner, in informal remarks during his presentation with Percy Fearing, "Workshop on New Designs and New Content for Upper Level High School Courses," at the ACTFL/SCOLT Joint Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, 25 November 1972.

[3]For a complete description of this research and its implications for classroom teaching, see my book, Communicative Competence: An Experiment in Foreign Language Teaching, Philadelphia: The Center for Curriculum Development, 1972 (Distributed by Rand McNally & Co.).

[4]Martin Shepard, A Psychiatrist's Head, New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973, p. 222. (Originally published under the same title, New York: David McKay & Co., 1972.)

[5]Teachers of French may recognize this as an allusion to Mise en train, a beginning French textbook by Michel Bénamou and Eugène Ionesco (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969) which uses such "nonsense" freely and imaginatively.

[6]This game is one of a collection of communication games included in Voix et Images de France Third Generation: Level I, ed. Roger Coulombe, Ronald Gougher, Patricia Johansen, Norman Paulin, Sandra J. Savignon, David E. Wolfe, Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1974.